

The Winder Family of Chesterville

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The Winder family and descendants lived at Chesterville throughout the 19th century and early 20th century. Mary Hundley Hudgins ^{m1}Haller ^{m2}Winder received the plantation as a wedding gift from her father, Colonel Houlder Hudgins, Sr., upon her marriage to Gabriel Louis Haller in a deed dated June 26, 1808.¹ Colonel Hudgins' description of the property, including seven hundred acres of land with multiple houses, gardens and orchards, waters and woods, reveals the wealth of the plantation.² Mary gave birth to a daughter, Louisa, about 1808; however, the happiness surrounding the baby was brief because Gabriel died shortly after Louisa's birth.

Within a few years, Mary remarried. Her second husband was Dr. George Harmanson Winder, a descendant of Governor George Yeardley of Virginia and a relative of Governor Levin Winder of Maryland. Dr. Winder, too, predeceased his wife, and the 1830 U.S. Federal Census states that Mary was the head of the household with six children still living at home. Mary died in 1845 and was buried in a small family cemetery on the property.³ She left the Chesterville house and property to her first child, daughter Louisa Haller. In 1847 at the age of thirty-nine, Louisa deeded the property to her half-brother, Levin Yeardley Winder.⁴ Louisa died in 1849 and was buried near her mother.

Shortly after acquiring Chesterville from his half-sister, Levin and his wife Annie (née Anna Decormis) sold a twenty-one acre section of the property to Levin's brother, John Holden Winder. John was born circa 1812, and he and his wife had established their household in the Back River District, in which Chesterville was located, by the 1840s. John and his wife Margaret (née Margaret Harwood) had four daughters, including one named Louisa, at the time he purchased the acreage from Levin.⁵ Levin Yeardley Winder was born circa 1822, and by 1850, he and Annie were comfortably situated at Chesterville with three young daughters and an infant son named Levin.⁶ Sadly, Annie died just prior to the Civil War, but a cousin, Mary Decormis, who was a few years older than their oldest daughter, stayed at Chesterville and cared for the children.

The Winders were farmers solely employed in the business of agriculture, and they were also slaveholders. Slavery was an accepted practice in the Tidewater region of Virginia, and farmers relied on slave labor to plant and harvest their crops. Slaves were often passed from generation to generation in a family, and Mary Winder was given twenty slaves in 1808 when she received Chesterville as a wedding gift. The number of slaves that Mary owned grew from twenty to thirty-five during her lifetime.⁷ Census records from 1820 through 1860 give the number of slaves on the property every ten years. Mary's sons, John and Levin, had fewer slaves

¹ Houlder Hudgins Sr. to Mary Hundley Haller (wife of Gabriel Louis Haller), June 26, 1808, *Deed Book of Elizabeth City County*

² Hudgins to Haller, June 26, 1808.

³ Barry W. Miles, James H. Mero, and Joseph A. Atkins, *Cemeteries of the City of Hampton, Virginia/formerly Elizabeth City County*, (Bowie: Heritage Books, Inc., 1999).

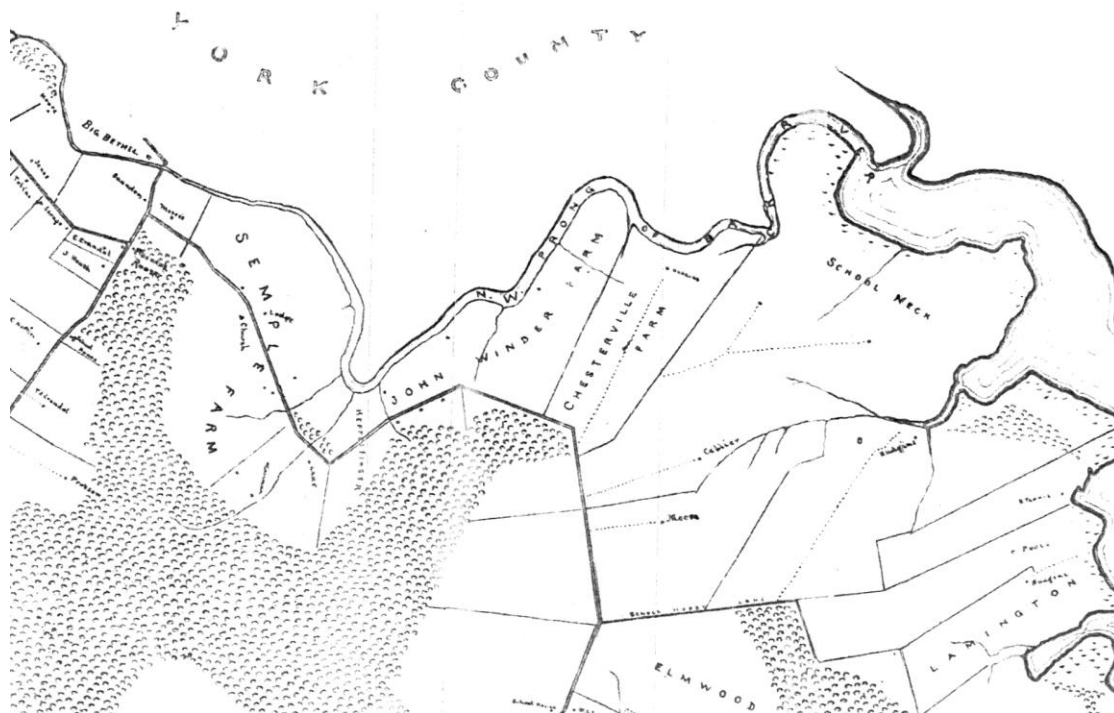
⁴ Louisa E. Haller to Levin Y. Winder, January 1, 1847, *Deed Book of Elizabeth City County*, vol. K, p. 498-500.

⁵ "John H. Winder," Back River District, Elizabeth City County, Virginia, 1850 U. S. Census, p. 57b.

⁶ "Levin Y. Winder," Back River District, Elizabeth City County, Virginia, 1850 U. S. Census, p. 57b.

⁷ "Doctr Geo. H. Winder," Elizabeth City County, Virginia, 1820 U. S. Census; "Mary Winder," Elizabeth City County, Virginia, 1830 U. S. Census; "Mrs. Mary H. Winder," Elizabeth City County, Virginia, 1840 U.S. Census

on their plantations. John consistently owned about twenty slaves, and Levin had about ten.⁸ Slaves are also listed in some of the family's deeds and wills as land was sold and property was passed on from one generation to the next.



Section of 1888 Semple Map showing John Winder's Farm, Chesterville, and Lamington which was Robert S. Hudgins' home

As tensions between the states grew in the 1850s, a civil war seemed inevitable, and when the war started in 1861, many men in Elizabeth City County joined the Confederate cause. Levin Winder enlisted in Company B of the Virginia 3rd Cavalry Regiment, and he served as a private during his enlistment.⁹ He fought alongside family members including his 19 year old first cousin, Robert S. Hudgins II, who lived at Lamington Plantation near Chesterville.¹⁰ The 3rd Cavalry Regiment entered Confederate service on July 1, 1861, and it saw many battles in Virginia as well as key battles outside of the Commonwealth, including the Battle of Big Bethel, the burning of Hampton, the battles of Williamsburg, the Seven Days, Antietam, Gettysburg, Wilderness, Cold Harbor, Five Forks and Farmville.

⁸ "John H. Winder," Elizabeth City County, Virginia, 1840 U.S. Census; "John H. Winder," Elizabeth City County, Virginia, 1850 U.S. Census; "Levin Y. Winder," Elizabeth City County, Virginia, 1850 U.S. Census; "Levin Y. Winder," Elizabeth City County, Virginia, 1860 U.S. Census.

⁹ Virginia. The Virginia Regimental Histories Series, 45 vols., (Lynchburg: Howard, 1987). In American Civil War Regiments database.

¹⁰ Robert S. Hudgins, Garland C. Hudgins, Richard B. Kleese and Gary Casteel, *Recollections of an Old Dominion Dragoon: The Civil War Experiences of Sgt. Robert S. Hudgins II, Company B, 3rd Virginia Cavalry*, (Orange, VA: Publisher's Press, Inc., 1993).

Levin's daughter, Sue Winder Segar, a girl of fourteen when the war began, described her memories of the Civil War, particularly the Battle of Big Bethel. She remembered the day before the Battle of Big Bethel in June 1861.¹¹

The famous battle of Bethel, fought on June 10th, 1861, was really the first horror that we children knew of war [...] and seven of us children of whom Annie and myself (twin sisters) were oldest, stood on the long portico watching with tearful eyes and terrified faces the panorama in the yard. Several men, all from the country, rode up on prancing steeds, my father joining them. They were armed and there was much loud talking and gesticulating among them. [...] My father [Levin], rather a large man, was mounted on a favorite horse 'Tuscarora' and what he said as the sq[u]ad rode off will go with me to my dying day. He said, waving his sword, 'Goodbye Chesterville, I may never see you again.' He had, before mounting, kissed us all goodbye.

The children were taken to their Uncle John Winder's farm nearby where they met other family members and spent a restless night wondering what the morning would bring.

Soon news came that a 'big battle' was going on at Bethel, two miles from us. We did not need to be told, as we could distinctly hear the firing and booming of cannon. We children, a dozen or more of us, stood at the gate and counted the 'booms,' as we called them, until they came in such quick succession we couldn't distinguish one from another. I remember our brother, Levin, saying every once in a while 'I reckon that is Pa who is shot.'



A section of a map showing the location of the Confederate earthworks at Big Bethel and the close proximity of the battle to John Winder's Farm and Chesterville.

"Plan of the advance of the army from Hampton to Big Bethel and Howard's Bridge, Virginia, 27th March 1862."

Robert Knox Sneden
Diary, Virginia Historical
Society, Richmond, Va.

When the battle ended, the Winders received word that women and children should leave the area, and by nine o'clock that night, a carriage with a few provisions was loaded, and they set off, passing through the battlefield at Bethel in order to reach Williamsburg. The Winder children did not return to Chesterville until after the war ended in 1865.

¹¹ Sue Segar, "Recollections of Chesterville," September 14, 1915, NASA Langley Research Center.

In August 1862, just a few months after the Battle of Bethel, General Magruder sent the 3rd Virginia Cavalry of Old Dominion Dragoons to burn Hampton in order to prevent Union occupation of the city.¹² Four companies were sent, but it must have been particularly difficult for the men of the 3rd Virginia who called Elizabeth City County and Hampton their home; however, they believed it to be a necessary sacrifice for their country. The fires burned through the night, and in the morning, only the old church, which had been exempted from the torch, remained. The following spring, the Union struck out against those who supported the Confederacy. Captain C.B. Wilder, the Assistant Quartermaster Superintendent of Contrabands at Fort Monroe, Virginia, received orders to take possession of several farms of “absentee disloyalists” if their occupants refused to take the oath of allegiance to the Union. The farms of Levin Winder, John Winder and Robert Hudgins were included on the list of properties to visit, and when the Winder family returned to their home after the war, they found it severely damaged.¹³

In 1874, Chesterville was sold at public auction. It was purchased by Francis Anton Schmelz and his wife Angelina. Francis, in turn, gave the property to his daughter Frances Ann “Fannie” Schmelz^{m1} Causey^{m2} Hudgins who was the wife of Levin Winder’s cousin and 3rd Virginia Cavalry comrade, Robert S. Hudgins.

¹² McCabe, Gillie Cary, *The Story of an Old Town, Hampton, Virginia*, (Richmond: Old Dominion Press, 1929).

¹³ Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies, 1861-1865, Series I: formal reports both union and confederate, with related correspondence, orders, and returns, Serial No 026 (vol. 18): Operations in North Carolina and Southeastern Virginia, August 20, 1862 – June 3, 1863.